

PROCESS FOR THE DISSOLUTION OF COPPER METAL

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a process for the dissolution of copper metal. More particularly, the invention relates to a process for producing a copper-containing aqueous solution by dissolving copper in the presence of an oxidant in an aqueous leach liquor containing monoethanolamine and (monoethanolammonium)₂ carbonate (HMEA)₂CO₃.

10 *Description of the Prior Art*

It is known to employ copper-containing aqueous solutions as biocidal fluids, for example, for the pressure treatment of lumber and for water purification. Examples of such fluids and uses thereof may be found, for example, in U.S. Patents 4,929,454 and U.S. Patent 6,294,071. The copper-containing solutions may be formulated, for example, by dissolving copper in aqueous solutions containing alkyl amines or alkyl hydroxy amines, such as 2-hydroxyethylamine.

Alternatively, copper-containing solutions may be produced by reacting copper oxide with chromic acid and arsenous acid to produce a solution of the copper with chrome and arsenic. The solution is subsequently diluted with water and the resulting aqueous solution may be injected into wood under pressure.

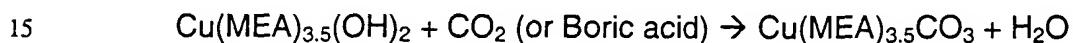
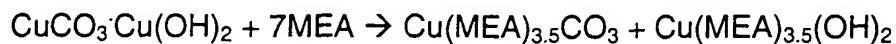
This chromated copper arsenate ("CCA") is the primary additive used in the treatment of wood against termite and other biological infestation.

25 Although the CCA is very effective, it has come under increased pressure

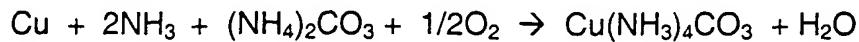
because of the environmental concerns associated with chromium and arsenic.

A new generation of pesticide is now emerging that appears to be efficacious, and which relies on the use of copper (in larger quantities than in the CCA) in combination with other pesticidal components, such as quaternary amines and triazoles. The copper is typically applied as a solution of the monoethanolamine complex of copper carbonate or borate. The commercial form of the copper concentrate usually contains about 100 to 130 g/l copper which is diluted with water prior to injection into the wood.

The copper complex is typically produced commercially by the dissolution of basic copper carbonate in a solution of monoethanolamine (MEA), followed by further carbonation or addition of boric acid. The reactions can be approximately represented by the following equations:



The production of the copper carbonate precursor has its own production and raw material costs, and a brine waste is generated which gives rise to environmental concerns. A more efficient process might be to produce the complex without the aid of an isolated precursor. It is known from the prior art that ammonia and carbon dioxide in water can be used to dissolve copper metal with oxygen from air as the oxidant. This is represented by the following equation:



The reaction proceeds well and has been the basis for copper dissolution in several commercial facilities. However, if the ammonia is not

initially carbonated, the kinetics are very poor which makes the process unattractive from a commercial standpoint.

A need exists for a more efficient process for producing copper-containing aqueous solutions, suitable for use in the wood-treatment industry.

5 The present invention seeks to fill that need.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It has been discovered, according to the present invention, that it is possible to efficiently produce copper-containing solutions directly without initially producing or isolating a precursor such as copper carbonate. The 10 present invention accordingly provides a process for producing a copper-containing aqueous solution, wherein a copper mass is dissolved in the presence of an oxidant in an aqueous leach liquor containing monoethanolamine and (monoethanolammonium)₂ carbonate (HMEA)₂CO₃, the leach liquor being produced by partially carbonating the 15 monoethanolamine. According to the process, copper-containing solution may be produced in 8-12 hours or less, more usually within about 8 hours or less.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention will now be described in more detail with 20 reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 is a schematic depiction of a batch dissolver to be used for performing the present invention in a batch-wise manner;

Figure 2 is a plot showing the copper dissolution in the batch process;

Figure 3 is a plot showing the copper dissolution rate as a function of time;

Figure 4 is a schematic for continuous production of MEA complex of copper solution;

5 Figure 5 is a plot showing the copper dissolution rate versus air flow rate in a continuous process at pH 9.8;

Figure 6 is a plot showing the copper dissolution rate versus air flow rate in a continuous process at pH 9.5;

10 Figure 7 is a plot showing the copper dissolution rate as a function of pH.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Referring to Figure 1, there is shown a batch dissolver, generally referenced 2, having a chamber 4, with a false bottom 6, and an air sparger 8 located below the false bottom. The chamber is surrounded by a heating coil 10 and has a top 12 through which extend a thermocouple 14 and an air inlet 16. The thermocouple is connected to a temperature control unit 18 and supplies heat to the heating coil 10 through conduit 20. Leach liquor 22 is circulated through the chamber by circulation pump 24 through lines 26,28. Copper metal 30, typically scrap copper, is present in the chamber and 20 immersed in the leach liquor to enable the dissolution to occur.

The term "copper" as used herein means copper metal, including scrap copper, such as for example copper wire, copper clippings, copper tubing, copper cabling and/or copper plate, compounds of copper, such as copper oxide, and/or mixtures of copper metal and copper compounds.

The term "copper mass" as used herein refers to copper metal in a form which, when present in the chamber, is permeable to the leach liquor and which presents high surface area for contact with the leach liquor to thereby expedite dissolution of the copper. The copper mass may be present

5 for example as a three-dimensional open permeable network, such as a bale of scrap copper comprised of copper wire, copper tubing, copper cabling, copper plates, providing voids between the copper pieces to allow free flow and maximum contact of the leach liquor with the copper. A bale may have a volume of for example about 25-100 cubic feet. Alternatively, the copper

10 mass may be present in the chamber as smaller irregular shaped pieces resembling "popcorn" ("blister shot") having an average dimension of about 1-3", which allow for good permeation of the leach liquor between and around the copper pieces to expedite dissolution thereof. Typically, the ratio of copper surface area to volume of leach liquor for this process versus a

15 standard agitated reactor is about 10-20:1, for example about 15:1.

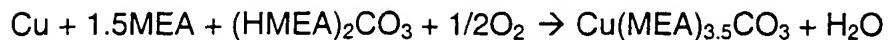
According to the process, the copper mass is dissolved in the presence of an oxidant in an aqueous leach liquor containing monoethanolamine and $(HMEA)_2CO_3$. Typically, for a 1 liter chamber, the air flow SCFH ranges from about 2-20, for example 3-10. The air flow SCFH will

20 increase as the volume of the chamber increases.

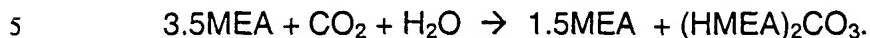
The leach liquor is produced by partially carbonating the monoethanolamine and may be generated externally of the dissolver or *in situ* in the chamber through addition of carbon dioxide to the monoethanolamine/water solution by sparging or bubbling into the chamber.

25 Usually, the leach liquor is produced externally of the chamber and introduced into the chamber into contact with the copper as required, or re-circulated as necessary.

The equation that represents the overall reaction is as follows:



The equation that represents the *in situ* or external partial carbonation of the monoethanolamine is as follows:



The amount of carbon dioxide introduced during the process is controlled such that partial carbonation occurs to form $(\text{HMEA})_2\text{CO}_3$.

Typically, the carbon dioxide is present in an amount of about 5-30% by weight, for example about 8-12% by weight.

10 The MEA is usually present in an amount of about 30-40 wt %, more usually 35-38 wt%. A typical aqueous leach solution of comprises about 36 wt% MEA and about 10% by weight carbon dioxide.

15 The monoethanolamine complex of copper carbonate solutions are typically prepared by dissolving the copper mass in a monothanolamine/ $\text{CO}_2/\text{H}_2\text{O}$ solution. The dissolution may be carried out in a batch dissolver (see Figure 1), or may be performed as a continuous process in towers packed with copper (see Figure 4). Typically, the copper and MEA/ $\text{CO}_2/\text{H}_2\text{O}$ solution are charged into the dissolver, and the circulation pump, air-flow and temperature controller are actuated. Examples of 20 conditions are given in Table 3 below.

25 The present inventors have discovered that it is not necessary to utilize precursors, such as copper carbonate which is expensive. The dissolution of the copper metal may be achieved in the presence of MEA, $(\text{HMEA})_2\text{CO}_3$ and an oxidant at elevated temperature, without the need for the addition of ammonium compounds such as ammonium hydroxide,

fungicidal anions, polyamines, carboxylic acids, alkali metal hydroxides such as sodium hydroxide, and/or alcohol-based solvents.

The dissolution of the copper metal is performed in the presence of an oxidant. Typically the oxidant is an air and/or oxygen, most usually air
5 sparging.

The leach solution is typically re-circulated in the reactor. Most typically, the re-circulation is carried out at a constant rate, and may be, for example, a constant rate of about one-tenth of the leach solution volume per minute.

10 The process may be carried out at atmospheric pressure and at a temperature of 25-100°C, for example 45–65°C. Typically, the temperature is maintained at 45–55°C.

15 The pH is typically maintained in the basic region, i.e. greater than 7, and is usually from about 8.0-11.3, more usually 9-10. The pH is usually maintained by addition of carbon dioxide as acid, or MEA as base.

The reaction proceeds slowly where there is a small surface area of copper available to contact the leach solution. For example, if the contact area of the copper metal to leach solution is doubled, the rate of the process doubles assuming adequate air-distribution.

20 It has been found that an aerated packed tower containing copper metal and circulating leach liquor is the most preferred method for commercial purposes. The advantage of using a packed tower is that it maintains a relatively high surface area to solution volume of copper metal.

According to another embodiment of the present invention, it is possible to utilize a reactor that contains a bed of copper and can be rotated while being heated and aerated.

Dissolving studies were conducted either batch-wise or continuously.

5 Figure 1 shows a conventional batch dissolver used for the batch-wise operation. Figure 4 shows a continuous dissolution process. The conditions used in the batch experiments are given in Table 1. The temperature was maintained at 45–55°C.

Table 1

EXP . #	Leach Solution				Cu Charge, g
	ID	Amine, %	CO ₂ , %	Volume, ml	
1	MEA-CO ₂ solution	36.7	12	600	400
2	MEA-CO ₂ solution	35.9	13	200	200

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The leach solutions are typically re-circulated in the reactor. Most typically, the re-circulation is carried out at a constant rate of about one-tenth. The solution concentration of copper (g/l) as a function of dissolution time is shown in Table 2:

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Table 2

EXP . #	Dissolution Time, hour							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	3.7	15.7	41.3	67.8	88.2	100.3		
2	5.4	16.8	55.7	85.1	102.5	119.2	126.4	136.1

In experiments 1 and 2 reported above, average copper dissolution
20 rates of about 17 g/l-hr were achieved over the course of the experiments. At those rates, the process is viable commercially. Raw material costs,

processing costs and waste are significantly reduced over the conventional process using copper carbonate.

Figure 4 is a schematic for the continuous production of MEA complex in solution. The dissolver, generally referenced 32, has a chamber 34, with a false bottom 36, and an air sparger 38 located below the false bottom. The chamber is surrounded by a heating coil 40 and has a top 42 through which extend a thermocouple 44 and an outlet 46. The thermocouple is connected to a temperature control unit 48 and supplies heat to the heating coil 40 through conduit 50. Leach liquor 52 is circulated through the chamber by circulation pumps 54 through lines 56,58. A copper mass 60 is present in the chamber and immersed in the leach liquor to enable the dissolution to occur. The system is also provided with a pH control 62 connected to a gravity controller 64 into which carbon dioxide is admitted from tank 66. Carbon dioxide off-gas is directed through line 46 to a carbon dioxide scrubber 68. Carbon dioxide from the scrubber 68 is fed to chamber 70 containing MEA and water which is pumped via pump 72 to chamber 34. The system also comprises an oxidation chamber 74 into which oxygen is admitted via line 76. Product enters at line 78 and following oxidation exits via line 80 and is transferred to product storage.

20 **EXAMPLES**

Examples of the process according to the present invention will now be described.

25 **EXAMPLE 1**

Batch Preparation of Monoethanolamine Complex of Copper Carbonate

Monoethanolamine complex of copper carbonate solutions were prepared by dissolving a copper metal mass in monoethanolamine/CO₂/H₂O solution in the batch dissolver in the presence of air sparging and at an 5 elevated temperature. Figure 1 shows a conventional batch dissolver used for the batch-wise operation.

Three experiments were conducted using the batch dissolver shown in Figure 1. In each experiment, about 1200 g copper and 1 liter MEA-CO₂-H₂O 10 solution were charged into the dissolver. The circulation pump, airflow and temperature controller were then started. The experimental conditions are given in Table 3.

Table 3

Exp ID	MEA-H ₂ O-CO ₂ Solution			Air Flow SCFH	Temperature °C	Circulation Rate ml/min
	MEA/H ₂ O ¹	%CO ₂	Sp.G			
1	0.900/1.00	13.7	1.165	6.0	51±1	182
2	0.733/1.00	14.1	1.160	6.0	51±1	182
3	0.900/1.00	13.7	1.165	6.0	76±1	182

15 When temperature reached the target temperature, the first sample of each batch was taken for analysis, and the timer was started. Complete results of these three dissolving batches are shown below, and are presented in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 is a plot showing the copper dissolution in the batch process, and Figure 3 is a plot showing the copper dissolution rate as a 20 function of time.

¹. Weight ratio

Table 4 Batch Dissolving - Experiment #1

Time, hour	%Cu	pH	Sp.G.	Copper, g/L
0	0.16	8.8	1.165	1.9
1	2.155	9.6	1.175	25.3
2	4.85	N/a	1.205	58.4
3	6.73	9.45	1.228	82.6
.4	7.66	9.6	1.239	94.9
5	8.36	9.6	1.251	104.5
6	9.23	9.6	1.262	116.5
7	9.79	N/a	1.271	124.4
8	10.32	9.65	1.277	131.8

Table 5 Batch Dissolving - Experiment #2

Time, hour	%Cu	pH	Sp.G.	Copper, g/L
0	1.17	9.00	1.170	13.7
1	3.5	9.25	1.180	41.3
2	6.07	9.30	1.204	73.1
3	7.37	9.37	1.223	90.1
4				
5	9.29	9.55	1.250	116.1
6	9.76	9.65	1.258	122.7
7	10.23	9.65	1.265	129.4
8	10.63	9.65	1.267	134.7

Table 6 Batch Dissolving - Experiment #3

Time, hour	%Cu	pH	Sp.G.	Copper, g/L
0	1.175	9.45	1.175	13.8
1	7.054	9.80	1.208	85.2
2	8.661	10.0	1.237	107.1
3	10.11	10.2	1.251	126.4
4	10.99	10.3	1.267	139.2

EXAMPLE 2

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A continuous dissolver assembly (see Figure 4) was used in the experiments described below. The assembly includes a one-liter size packed-tower dissolver (used in the batch dissolving experiments described above); a gravity controller, a temperature controller, a pH monitor, an air flow meter, a circulation pump and a pump for simultaneous withdraw and

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replenish of solutions. The gravity controller held about 1 liter of the product solution. The solution in the assembly was circulated between the gravity controller and the dissolver at a constant rate of 325 ml/min. Occasionally, CO₂ gas was bubbled through the bottom of the gravity control chamber to
5 adjust the pH of the solution. In all experiments described below, the reaction temperature and specific gravity were controlled at 50±2 °C and 1.271±0.001 g/ml, respectively. During a continuous dissolving experiment, copper is continuously dissolved and results in a graduate increase of the specific gravity of the copper-containing solution. When the gravity reaches a
10 pre-set value, i.e. 1.272, it triggers a pump to withdraw the product solution and replenish MEA-CO₂ solution simultaneously. The composition of the MEA-CO₂ solution used in all continuous dissolving experiments is the same as that of Exp#1 of batch process (Table 3). The dissolver was charged on a daily basis with 1" pieces of 11-13 AWG scrap copper wires and maintained
15 a total copper loading of 1100-1200 grams at any given period of the experiments. Results are shown below in Table 7 along with the experimental conditions used, and are also presented in Figures 5-7. Figure 5 is a plot showing the copper dissolution rate versus air flow rate in a continuous process at pH 9.8, Figure 6 is a plot showing the copper dissolution rate versus air flow rate in a continuous process at pH 9.5 and
20 Figure 7 is a plot showing the copper dissolution rate as a function of pH.

Table 7. Conditions and Results of Continuous Dissolving Experiments

Duration Hour	pH	Air Flow SCFH	MEA-Cu-CO ₂ Solution		Copper Dissolution g/l/hr
			Volume, ml	Copper, %	
2.13	9.8	6.0	125	10.61	7.91
2.13	9.8	3.0	85	10.41	5.28
0.65	9.8	8.0	41	10.41	8.35
3.35	9.5	6.0	183	10.15	7.05
0.64	9.5	10.0	46	10.15	9.27
0.78	9.5	4.5	35	10.15	5.79
4.1	9.1	6.0	123	9.575	3.65

While the invention has been described in connection with what is presently considered to be the most practical and preferred embodiment, it is to be understood that the invention is not to be limited to the disclosed embodiment, but on the contrary, is intended to cover various modifications 5 and equivalent arrangements included within the spirit and scope of the appended claims.